

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHB0 #4588/01 3591912
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 241912Z DEC 08 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6303
INFO RUEHSW/AMEMBASSY BERN PRIORITY 1513
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 8572
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1461
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 6856
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 0507
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 2818
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1490
RUEHQQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 7553
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFIUU/FBI WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFIISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 004588

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/24/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF PTER PHUM CO

SUBJECT: Uribe rejects international participation in possible FARC hostage release

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor David M. Zimov
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The FARC announced on December 21 their intention to release six hostages to a group of Colombian "intellectuals" led by Piedad Cordoba, and reiterated its demand for a demilitarized zone. Cordoba said President Chavez should participate in the process, but President Uribe quickly rejected any international involvement to prevent damage to Colombia's international relations and to avoid turning the release into a "political show." Uribe said the GOC would provide needed security guarantees to the ICRC to support any hostage release. Peace Commissioner Restrepo said the FARC is playing politics with the hostage issue, and that their real intent is to impact 2010 presidential elections, to bolster Piedad Cordoba's image, and to gain space to regroup and launch more terrorist attacks. Christophe Beney, the head of the Colombian ICRC delegation, said the ICRC's work to secure hostage releases was complicated by the misuse of the ICRC emblem in Operation Jacque and by the FARC's new "with us or against us" mentality. End summary.

FARC ANNOUNCES POSSIBLE RELEASE OF 6 HOSTAGES

¶2. (U) The FARC announced in a December 21 communique their intention to release six hostages to a group of Colombian "intellectuals" led by Senator Piedad Cordoba--likely in early January. The FARC claimed the planned hostage release was a demonstration of good will and a "gesture aimed at creating conditions favorable to a humanitarian exchange." The hostages would reportedly include three police officers, one soldier, former-Meta Governor Alan Jara, and former-Valle congresswoman Sigifredo Lopez. Lopez is the only survivor of a group of 12 Valle congressmen kidnapped in 2002; the others were executed by the FARC in June 2007. Cordoba planned to request the participation of President Hugo Chavez, who reportedly said on December 17 that he remains willing to assist in hostage releases. On December 24, in a separate communique, the FARC reiterated its demand for a demilitarized zone ("despeje") in Florida and Pradera, Valle department.

URIBE REJECTS INTERNATIONAL PARTICIPATION

¶3. (U) President Uribe announced on December 22 that he would not allow future hostage releases to turn into a "political show." He said the GOC would provide every possible security guarantee to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to support a release. In a veiled reference to President Hugo Chavez and the January 2008 operation that led to the release of former-FARC hostage Clara Rojas, Uribe said that "international personalities" would not be allowed to involve themselves in the process to avoid "creating problems for the country's international relations."

¶4. (U) Uribe also highlighted the December 7 FARC attack on a humanitarian mission in Caqueta that killed two health care workers and the December 21 FARC kidnapping of ten peasants from Cubarral, Meta. Uribe said the FARC's duplicity raised questions about their real intentions, adding, "we cannot accept the FARC's trap. . .when they murder at the same time that they launch illusions of peace."

FARC PLAYING POLITICS

¶5. (C) In a December 14, 2008 interview with "El Espectador," Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo said "the perverse game of the FARC is to insert the issue of the hostages into the next electoral campaign." Restrepo told us separately that the intellectuals' letter exchanges were staged to bolster Cordoba's image, and that FARC leader Alfonso Cano's real intention was to consolidate the FARC's military power and increase its capacity for future terrorist attacks. Presidential advisor Jose Obdulio Gaviria told us the intellectuals' letters represented a "false peace process."

He said some of the intellectuals were likely FARC sympathizers manipulating "useful idiots" into questioning the GOC's democratic legitimacy--with a side goal of wanting to smear President Uribe. Respected academic and conflict analyst Jorge Restrepo told us Uribe had "killed the FARC politically," and that the FARC's release proposal was designed to help restore its image through dialogue with the intellectuals.

PRESSURE ON URIBE TO ACCEPT INTERNATIONAL HELP

¶6. (U) Former President Ernesto Samper publicly urged Uribe to allow Chavez to act as an intermediary, noting that Chavez could play a constructive role and that Venezuelan helicopters and communications systems could provide valuable logistical support. Carlos Lozano, director of the Communist weekly "Voz," noted the FARC would likely be hesitant to proceed with any future hostage releases without the presence of the international community due to the misuse of the ICRC emblem during Operation Jaque.

ICRC READY TO ASSIST

¶7. (C) ICRC Chief in Colombia, Christophe Beney, told the Ambassador December 22, that the ICRC remains committed to securing the release of all remaining hostages. Still, the ICRC lost many high level FARC contacts in 2008 due to the deaths of key FARC leaders. Beney said the use of the ICRC emblem during Operation Jaque in July--that freed Amcits Tom Howes, Marc Gonsalves, and Keith Stansell, Ingrid Betancourt and other Colombian hostages--could complicate future releases. Beney said that the attitude of many FARC leaders is that "you are either with us or against us," which makes it difficult for ICRC to fulfill its role as an independent and neutral intermediary. Beney added that an end to the Colombian conflict is unlikely in 2009.

BROWNFIELD